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WHAT IS A MATURE MIND?

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It is sometimes supposed that religion is not much concerned with mentality. Its province is to move the heart and save the soul. It doesn't need to clear the mind. Not that we find this stated as a formal proposition; if it were, it might seem rather shocking. But we see it as an attitude. Religious questions must be approached in what is called "the right spirit," which is a euphemism for suspension of the critical faculties. In the same way, faith and reason are regarded as antagonists: if you lean towards the one, you are suspicious of the other. It is better not to use your mind too much: you might end up by losing your religion.

Lately, however, largely due to the influence of the psychologists, religious people have been noticing their minds, and in some cases quite favorably. It is not that they wish their minds to be more active; on the contrary, they want to pacify them, soothe them, tranquillize them, settle them down. The aim in view is *peace* of mind, not an upsurge of mental energy. But still, even peace of mind, like any other peace, must be negotiated, and there is no way of doing it without thinking about it. In fact, the mental situation must be studied, its troubles diagnosed, its maladies identified and understood. All of which requires a little thought, and a kind of thought that can't leave out religion.

Therefore, as I say, religious people have been studying their minds. They should have done it long since. They should have noticed that the great exemplars worshipped God not only with their hearts but with their intellects. The challenge of Jesus was not only moral: it was mental, too. He jarred his audience into thinking. Sometimes, they didn't like it, but once begun, they found it hard to stop it. He made fun of their stereotyped ideas, and invented parables that couldn't be forgotten but went right on

disturbing their opinions. He said that God should be loved with the whole mind as well as the whole heart and the whole soul, and it never occurred to him that there could be a conflict between faith and reason. His own faith he arrived at by thinking about it, and then submitting it to the tests of experience. Instead of going to the Scriptures with his critical faculties suspended, he used them so vigorously that conventional believers could scarcely bear it.

It is a pity that we had to wait for the psychologists to show us that an active interest in our minds is not profane or sacrilegious. And even so, in following the psychologists we have had to go, of course, from the bottom of our mind up, instead of from the top down, and many people have never managed to get up except occasionally for air. Or in plainer words, assuming that rationality is at the top and instinctual drives at the bottom, their interest stops half way and they become preoccupied with their neuroses. The full, free use of reason seems too strenuous. They are afraid of it. And so their maladies continue, frequently much complicated by harmful residues of false and obsolete religion.

I am aware that in speaking thus of the mind I am not clearly separating the emotional from the mental. In experience, they never can be separated; and in thought, it is sometimes well to recognize that fact. But it is the mind that has the marvellous capacity of looking into itself, of seeing itself, so to speak, at work, and of finding out what factors are affecting it and what energies are running through it, including the ones we call emotional. So necessarily, it is at the mental level that inquiry takes its standpoint and at the mental level that we see ourselves and everything about us. And so I am not bothering with classifications that in the end are academic; what I am trying to do is to say some understandable things about ourselves and especially about that never-ceasing process at the focus of our lives which thinks, perceives, creates, and which we call our minds, and I am suggesting that religion has a deep concern with what is going on there—a concern, in short, with everything called mental.

This concern is best summed up in a word much used in recent days—maturity. The mature mind is, of course, a hypothesis or an ideal and never an actuality. It can be imagined but it cannot be demonstrated. It can, however, be approximated. That is to say, we can keep coming closer to it. But unfortunately, we generally don't. As the years go by, we are much more likely to become cleverer than we are to grow wiser. And instead of extending the reach of our thought, or achieving new thoughts and better ones, we just re-shuffle the old ones. Old people, instead of becoming mentally more adventurous, as they certainly should if their minds were working well, become conservative instead. This is a great loss, not only to them but to all of us. For surely, it is the young who have a lot to risk if they break the bounds of conformity; for them

it is dangerous. But for the old, the danger should not matter. Like Socrates, they should think more bravely as remaining years grow fewer, and be less afraid if thinking gets them into trouble. It is not right that the mind should first of all be self-protective and prudential. *Action* should, perhaps, at times—but not *thought*. The mind should be free of the universe, free to range wherever it can—and to extend its range. A growing mind is an adventurous mind, not only extolling freedom but using it.

That is what Channing meant in his famous passage, so much quoted. “I call that mind free . . . which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, whilst consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself, and uses (what comes from without) not to supersede but to quicken and exalt its own energies.”

The first characteristic, then, of a maturing mind is its growth in freedom—growth through the exercise, the actual *use* of freedom. There is nothing concerning which it does not dare to think, and having thought once, to think again and again. But to many people, unhappily, this seems dangerous. It is not necessary for a tyrant to impose his “thought-control” to put a boundary around their thinking: they build one for themselves. Sometimes they do it in the name of religion. There are some things, they say to themselves, that it is best not to think about, or at least, not very much. Which is absolutely false. When God gave us minds, he gave us unlimited freedom in the use of them.

It is sad that we grow tired of this freedom and reduce the frontier of our expectations. We are like the worn-down professor to whom a student came with an apology for being late to class. “But tomorrow,” he said, “I’ll be here bright and early.” “Don’t promise too much,” replied the professor. “Just be here early.” And that’s what we have—people who are afraid of promising themselves too much—and so the problems of the world grow great and underdeveloped minds are far outmatched and cannot solve them. This being so, some people turn to prayer, requesting God to take the situation over. It is the kind of praying in which thinking stops, and the evidence of history is that God doesn’t heed it. Prayer should quicken thought, not stupefy it; and when it does quicken it, we soon see that God has already given us all the help we need—minds that are free to think and plan: an unlimited freedom to those who are willing to use it.

The second characteristic of a mature mind—or one moving towards maturity—is unclouded realism, a trained capacity for facing facts. Now here again we come to something that is always being misjudged—and in the name of religion. People look to religion to *mask* reality, to place a

painted veil between themselves and facts, and this in spite of such known events as that Jesus faced reality in a wilderness and measured his mind and soul against it until he found his faith—which carried him to another reality, and a very ugly one: the reality of his crucifixion. Religion is not shelter—not a sanctuary for the timid; religion is the victory of courage. And the mature mind wants to know this and to absorb it—to accept it fully and be guided by it—until it has played its part in making us the masters of our destiny. Whatever will not face the real will live in fear of it, and in the end be vanquished by it. But whatever *does* face the real becomes more real itself and triumphs through its own reality.

A third characteristic of the mature mind is the power of being objective and detached. It does not instantly become defensive when opinions with which it is identified come under attack. It weighs evidence and argument, even when it is disagreeable to do so, and never loads the scales against the truth. It is capable of projection—genuine projection—into an opposed viewpoint and gives it patient and sincere consideration. Emotion is allowed to color its enjoyments but never permitted to blur its perceptions. Its logic is less for the purpose of defeating an opponent than for testing his argument. A mind that defeats an adversary when the adversary may be right is defeating itself. Nothing can make the true untrue, and a mind that attempts it incapacitates itself. It is like putting out one's eyes rather than see what is there. The thing is still there and must now be faced in blindness. So is it with a mind that maims itself in futile battle with the truth. It loses—and is less a mind.

A fourth characteristic of a mature mind is that it is self-knowing. I use the adjective—the participial adjective—rather than the noun, *self-knowledge*, because self-knowledge sounds like something settled, and I wish to indicate something quite *unsettled*. There are too many people whose self-knowledge has not kept up with themselves and so is out of date. It is better that we be self-knowing, improving our acquaintance with ourselves as life moves on, and becoming humbler all the while through seeing how much we resemble other people. These other people, of course, are not only the ones we like, but also the ones we would not be seen dead with. We are often very like them, which explains why they on their part would not be seen dead with us. There is time only to mention this need to be self-knowing, but I should add this even in the briefest treatment: self-knowing and preoccupation with oneself are very different things. The person who is self-preoccupied is also self-infatuated. This will keep his mind quite infantile. But the person who is self-knowing—who really knows himself—doesn't want to spend too much time in his own company. He doesn't like himself that well, and is prone to be refreshed by spending time with other people.

Other qualities I shall only briefly mention. The well grown mind is self-respecting. The reason for this is not to bolster itself up: it is self-respecting because it keeps itself respectable. All too many people try to respect their minds without a solid basis for it. It doesn't work, and no one is deceived. A childish mind can't be made respectable in an adult merely by dressing it in grown-up's clothes. And this remains the case no matter how many books you read that promise—whether crassly or subtly—that it can be done. Actually, they are not books on psychology—these numerous popular ones—but books on psychological “make-up.” They should be classified not as science or philosophy but as cosmetics.

That the well grown mind will be independent I have already indicated; also that it will not be bound by habit, even the habit of independence, which like most things else can easily be carried too far. An independent mind is not a mind of lonely and majestic eminence, removed above the common level like a mountain top against the sky. A person who thinks he has this kind of mind is mistaking a cave for a mountain. The reverberations that he hears are not the sound of Jovian thunder applauding his great thoughts, but echoes of a stuttered whisper magnified in an enclosed place. No, an independent mind is a very democratic mind, quite sociable, hospitable, a good host and a good guest, and is found frequently where other people are thinking. But it is not intimidated, not tempted by the comfort of conformity. When need be, it will go it alone, even in a crowd, even with friends—and that is the severest test—and nothing that the world could pay would buy away its liberty.

But I wish to come now to what is too seldom emphasized when the mature mind is under discussion. We tend to think—though this is less possible now than once it was—of mind and soul, or mind and conscience, as somehow separable. The function of the mind is rationality, that of the soul an awareness of intangibles, an intuitive sense of value. Or the function of the mind is solely intellectual, leaving to conscience the standards we describe as ethical or moral. These classifications are useful in their place—but not when they mislead us into thinking that they have a structural validity. What we call soul—or conscience—do not, so to speak, take over from the mind, like alternative steersmen at the wheel of a ship. The soul's awareness does not stop the mind from working; nor can a mental process exclude the conscience. To think carelessly, for instance, is to think wrongly, and conscience will rebuke it. It is the same when we think falsely, perfidiously: it is immoral as well as irrational to cause our minds to lie to us. There is no such thing, therefore, as an a-moral or a non-moral intellect. And certainly, the mature kind—or, as I have more modestly and I think more accurately called it, the well grown mind—is guided not only by true and false, but also by right and wrong.

Let me illustrate: a friend of mine confessed to me that at one time he was strongly affected by race prejudice. He had been brought up that way. And he found it comfortable to entertain in his thinking what he then contended were very logical arguments in support of a necessary measure of social segregation. He was not convinced—and this he made plain to himself—that skin color signified irremovable differences in latent capacity. Perhaps the Negro was potentially the equal of the white. This admission increased his comfort, his sense of security within the structure of his argument. For it made him seem unprejudiced—or so he told himself. He *did* believe in the equality of races, and accepted what the scientists had said about it. But it was needful to have social order, and non-segregation was disorderly. It wouldn't work. It was also clear that Negroes, with few exceptions, were less educated than Caucasians, and this would not immediately be remedied. These were *social* facts—and there were others. They added up, it seemed, to an impeccable argument. And the barrier could be maintained—and emotionally enjoyed—without being vulnerable to the charge of prejudice. So he thought, and his thinking had been strenuous.

Then, in Washington, his work brought him into frequent contact with Negroes; he also came to know of the segregated school system, and of the barriers in restaurants and other public places. At the same time that this was happening, he was working with the representatives of foreign nations—of Asian nations in particular—and the race question began to grow in scope. Do as he would he could not keep his argument protected. Race segregation was not national but international and would tear the world apart if it was not ended. Instead of providing social order, it would guarantee *disorder*. He mended his arguments as best he could but he was not willing—not quite—to stunt the growth of his mind. And his mind *was* growing. Could he come to accept, he asked himself, something that was convincing him in reason but was not pleasing him emotionally? That was an honest question—a grown-up question. As soon as he had asked it, he knew that what he was up against was—in spite of all his earlier, plausible persuasions—just prejudice—or emotionally loaded opinion. He had forced his mind, and very cleverly, to anesthetize his conscience. Right and wrong had been put to sleep so that he could build in peace an argument that was—or so he told himself—completely rational.

But now, he was up against it. Right and wrong had wakened up. He had not been able to prevent it. At first, he was resentful at it. Then he saw that his resentment was denying him his self-respect. He also saw that it was not adult and that it had no place within a well grown mind. He saw that unless he set his thinking free, he would doom his mind to inferiority. It would be a captive mind, enslaved by prejudice. And at last, he made his decision: which was, of course, to surrender his prejudice.

He did not do it merely privately; he told his friends about it. He acted on his new conviction. And this is what surprised him: it was not painful at all. Emotionally, he felt better. He was on the right side and he knew it. For there *was* a right side. There always is. Nothing is more foolish than to suppose that right and wrong can be housed, so to speak, separately, in a room called conscience, and banished from the workings of the mind.

So true is this that a wrong-thinking mind can easily become an unhinged mind, a disordered mind. To banish the question of right and wrong is to invite not only moral retribution but derangement. Far short of that, however, it can keep the mind from growing up—can dwarf it and deform it. It can do so either little or much, but whatever the extent the loss is always painful. What a pity it is! So many people in the world, and such nice people, too, in lots of ways, with bright little dwarfish in a bright little childish world, inventing forever new games, new pageants minds that think up bright little clever thoughts, wishing they could live and parades, new brightly painted toys. The trouble is that the world is now too dangerous for undersized minds. Our thinking must grow up. And especially thinking with the recognition of right and wrong in it.

We must love the Lord our God, said Jesus, with all our minds. With all our hearts, yes, and with all our souls and our strength. *But also with our minds!* Ah no, we say, we want God in our souls, where beauty dwells! What solace it can bring us and what peace! But not in our minds! No, surely, not in our minds! God *thinking* in us, God in all our thoughts? How could we bear it? Thinking nothing but the truth! No, let him come at moments only, moments of the soul's awareness. Let him come when we invite him. Let him come but not remain! We will worship him at candle-lighted altars, and with hearts adoring—but with muted thoughts! Not in the daylight of our minds, O God, transparent in thy presence so that even we must see!

Is that our prayer—the prayer unspoken? God cannot heed it. He is in our minds already. That's why we have no peace. God is the pain within a truth distorted, the ache of perfidy, the anguish of a spurious argument; God is the restlessness within a traitorous thought.

And God is also in the mind's adventure, in all its freedom, in its quest to know the good and find the true. God is the faithful mind's reward, the power and sweep of widening understanding. So why not give him room? He is our friend: why keep him prisoner?

Prayer: *O God of the light we fear and of the righteousness we fly from, show us yet once again that fears will vanish at our bidding, and that those who walk with courage walk with thee. Amen.*

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